

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT



BLESSED ARE THE MEEK OF HEART



BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT  
BLESSED ARE THE MEEK OF HEART

BY

THE VERY REVEREND THOMAS N. BURKE

(DELIVERED AT THE ADVENT CONFERENCES AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN DUBLIN, IRELAND)

**COVER ART:**

*"The Angelus" (L'Angelus).* Oil on canvas by French painter, Jean-Francois Millet (1814 - 1875). It was painted between 1857 and 1859 and is currently located at the Musée d'Orsay, in Paris, France. The painting is in the Public Domain. \*



\* The original of this work is in the public domain in the United States and countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.



# ON THE FIRST BEATITUDE

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”*

We are come together to consider the things that regard our eternal interests—to consider what we owe to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves. We meet to reflect on the Divine law, the reasons and extent of its obligations, and our own fulfillment of them.

## BLESSINGS BEING CATHOLICS

In all this, we have not to seek for the truth, but only to reflect upon it, and apply it to ourselves. We have an infallible guide to the truth—*the Church*—the pillar and the ground of truth. We are not forced, thank God, to fall back upon our own judgment, like those of whom Saint Peter speaks, “blind and groping.” To you I say, in the words of the same Apostle, “I will begin to put you in remembrance of these things, though indeed you know them and are confirmed in the present truth; but I think it meet to stir you up by putting you in remembrance.”

Not so with others, to whom an entrance has not been ministered into “the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.” They are obliged to inquire into everything, to attempt to prove everything—even first principles and the mysteries of revelation—and they are tempted to reject even the holiest truths of God, which are discussed before that most fallible tribunal—*the reason of man*.

Of such, a great man formerly intimately connected with this university, complains, whilst yet a Protestant, in the introduction to one of his works. “It is unhappy,” he says, “that we should be obliged to discuss and defend what a Christian people were intended to enjoy; obliged to appeal to their intellects instead of stirring up their pure mind, by way of admonition; obliged to direct them towards articles of faith that should be their place of starting; and obliged to treat as mere conclusions, what in other ages have been assumed as first principles.”

“Surely life is not long enough to prove everything that may be made the subject of proof. Though inquiry is left partly open to try our earnestness, it is still in great measure and in the most important points, superseded by revelation. Revelation discloses things that reason could not reach. Revelation saves us the labor of using reason when it might avail and it thereby sanctions the principle of dispensing it.” Then, he adds, “We have succeeded in raising clouds that effectively hide the sun from us. We have nothing left but to grope our way by reason as we best can—of necessity because now our only guide.... We have asserted our right of debating every truth, however sacred, however



protected from scrutiny heretofore. We have accounted that belief alone to be manly which commenced in doubt, that inquiry alone to be philosophical which assumed no first principles, that religion alone to be rational which we have created for ourselves.”

The end, my brethren, “loss of labor, division, and error have been the threefold gain of our self-will, as evidently visited in this world—not to follow it into the next.”

Such was the testimony of a singularly deep and candid mind, even before it was yet enlightened by the pure rays of divine truth. Yet, for us, we seek not to find out what is the truth. That we have already found. Our great Mother holds it, and propounds it, and we say to her in the words of the Apostle, “I know whom I have believed, and I am certain that she is able to keep that which hath been committed unto her,” (*Scio cui credidi et certus sum quia potens est depositum meum servare.*) the sacred deposit of all truth.

Yet, we inquire, “that we may be able to comprehend with all the saints, what are the breadth, and length, and height, and depth of that divine truth.” We also want to know, “the charity of Christ, which surpasseth all knowledge,” (i.e., to pursue the truth into all the details of its practical teaching in the moral law, where our faith reveals itself in charity “unto all the fullness of God”). This is the great object of the Catholic preacher, after the example of our Divine Lord himself, for it is worthy to mention that His first Sermon on the Mount, in which we might naturally expect an exposition of Christian dogma, was a moral sermon. It sketched out the great features of the Christian character, by which His followers should be individually known amongst men to the end of time. Let us consider those great features.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The first word spoken by our Lord was, “Blessed.” “Much people followed Him,” says the Evangelist, “from Galilee, from Decapolis, from Jerusalem, and from beyond the Jordan. Seeing the multitude, He went up into a mountain.” This was His pulpit—befitting the preacher and His message. He was “the desired of the everlasting hills,” and it was written, “Get Thee up into a high mountain; Thou that bringest good tidings to Sion; lift up Thy voice, Thou that bringest good tidings to Jerusalem; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Juda, behold your God,” and opening His mouth, He taught them.

At this time, the mouth of God had been closed for four thousand years. When last it spoke, it was to curse the first sinner and the earth in the sinner’s work, “Cursed is the earth in thy work.” “The earth is infected,” (Isaias) “for the Lord hath spoken this word, . . . therefore shall a curse devour the earth.”



## CHRIST, THE ANTITHESIS OF ADAM.

It was fitting that Christ's first word should revoke His earlier curse, for, as Saint Paul loves to bring out, Christ was the antithesis of Adam. "As by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners; so also, by the obedience of one man, many shall be made just; . . . therefore, as by the offense of one, unto all men to condemnation; so also, by the justice of one, unto all men to justification of life."

Yet, if we look into the blessing, we shall find that the curse pronounced upon the world is rather confirmed than revoked by the blessing, for it says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit;" (i.e., *Blessed are they who in some sense or other are alienated and separated from the world*).

## WHY CHRIST BEGINS WITH THE SPIRIT.

Mark that Christ begins with the spirit.

First, because "God is a spirit, and they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth." Hence, the Apostle says, "God is my witness whom I serve in my spirit."

Second, because *the spirit or seat of the affections* is that portion of man's soul that guides and influences all the action of his life. There are *two* great portions, divisions, powers, or faculties in the soul of man: first, the *apprehensive or intellectual*, and second, the *affective or appetitive*.

The first great division of the soul, *apprehensive or intellectual*, contains the *memory*. The office of this first great portion of the soul is to apprehend and preserve ideas and to form knowledge from those ideas.

The second great division of the soul, *affective or appetitive*, which we have called the spirit (for the very word *suspirare* signifies desire), contains *the intellectual appetite or will*, the affections and desires. As this will of man (led not only by the intellect but still more forcibly *by the passions or desires* according to the saying of the poet, "*trahit sua quemque voluptas*") determines his every act (for that act alone is human which proceeds from it), it follows that the portion of the soul that holds this will and these affections and desires is *the source and spring of all moral life in man*.

Christ our Lord, therefore, began with the spirit, because He wished to change the face of the earth. "Send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created, and Thou shalt renew the face of the earth." The Spirit of God was to go forth and to take the place of the human spirit and Christianity was to effect this so men should no longer be led by their own spirit (i.e., their own natural affections and desires) but by the Spirit of God. According to the word of the Apostle, "Whosoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of



God,” and thus they should “put on the Lord Jesus Christ; for if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.” To Christians he says, “Know you not that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” Blessed, then says the Savior, are the poor in spirit.

Some commentators apply this word to those who are really poor, either by privation in the world or by the high, voluntary poverty of holy religion that we find in the cloister. That the text bears such an application is abundantly proved from Saint Luke, who adds in the context, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have your consolation.”

Still, the text bears *a much more extended application*. Others therefore interpret poverty of spirit *to mean humility, the foundation and (at the same time) the crown of all virtues*. This interpretation is also true and that most adopted by the holy fathers. Yet, we can find even more in this beatitude than the canonization of humility. As it was the first feature of the Christian character propounded by the Savior, upon reflection, we find in this beatitude the first foundation of Christian life: namely, *Faith*. Truly, the man who is poor in spirit means the man of faith. *What is poverty? Poverty means privation, an emptiness, or an absence of something, a casting away from us and a renunciation of something*. Poverty of spirit, then, would mean a casting away of desires, affections, and appetites considering that the spirit of man is the seat of all these.

Does Almighty God demand of us a relinquishing of all affections and desires? In other words, does He demand of us a destruction of this great portion of our being? Certainly, He does not. God is not a destroyer and destruction is not pleasing to Him. It is not, then, so much the *destruction* as the *transfer* of our desires, hopes, and affections, that Almighty God demands of us by poverty of spirit. There are two kinds of possessions: the temporal and the eternal—the visible and the invisible—the things of the present and those of the future—the *goods of sense and the goods of faith*.

Man is naturally inclined to seek the things of this world rather than those of the world to come. He depends much upon his senses, even for the things that belong to the soul, such as knowledge and even faith. He is completely surrounded by sense that he is naturally inclined to rest in sense, to seek his happiness in the present enjoyment of sense, and to put away from him all consideration of future and unseen things. Even more, men are unwilling to make any sacrifice for the sake of the unseen—to relinquish the visible for the invisible—to deprive ourselves of present enjoyment because of blessings to come. We all love ourselves faithfully—intensely. We love ourselves better than anything else—better than our neighbor—than virtue—than God.

Now, Christ our Lord, by redemption, made us the sons of God; “and he gave them power to become sons of God.” As such, we must be different from the old, the natural man, in spirit (i.e., in thoughts, in desires, in affections, in views, in conduct). The



Apostle clearly points this out when he says, “The first man was of the earth—earthly; the second man from heaven—heavenly. Such as is the earthly—such also are the earthly, and such as is the heavenly—such also are they that are heavenly. Therefore, as we have borne the image of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly.”

Before we can put on the image of the heavenly man, so as to conform to the Lord Jesus Christ—in a word, before we become Christians, we must cast away from us the old man, the human spirit, and hence *poverty of spirit is the beginning, the foundation, of the Christian character.*

Faith is “the substance of things to be hoped for,” consequently, future blessings. Faith is “the conviction of things that appear not,” consequently, things not to be apprehended by the senses. Thus, the Apostle says, “*Per fidem ambulamus, et non per speciem.*”

The man of faith is he who has views and desires beyond and above this world and sense. The man of faith is he who makes not the things of sense the last and great object of his wishes and desires. The man of faith is he who uses not at all the things that are when they cross or impede his eternal interest (i.e., when they are sinful) and in the things he uses has something in view beyond what is seen. The man of faith is he who makes all that is created subservient to the uncreated, all that is temporal conducive to that which is eternal, all that is of earth serviceable for that which is heavenly. Such is the man of faith. Oh, glorious man, like to the Son of God!



## ON THE SECOND BEATITUDE

*“Blessed are the meek of heart, for they shall possess the land.”*

This is the next feature of the Christian character brought out by our Divine Lord. The Christian must be not only a man of faith—living for divine purposes—influenced by supernatural motives—**grasping at the invisible beneath the forms of things that appear**. The Christian must also be imbued with the virtue of meekness. Remember, Christianity means perfection—the very perfection of man—of human nature in all its natural properties and powers. Far beyond this, Christianity means the perfection of human nature in all the supernatural gifts of divine grace. Life, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, is spontaneous motion. There are two kinds of motion: one produced by something external or extrinsic to the thing moved, as when the powerful attraction of the sun moves the inanimate earth. The other is caused by something internal or intrinsic, as when the human body is moved by the living soul or principle of motion within it. Saint Thomas calls this intrinsic or spontaneous motion.

If you reflect on the definition, you will find it comprehensive and pertinent, for our idea of life is motion of some kind and we idea of a starting-point, a point to be reached, and an effort to pass from one to the other. The Catholic Church teaches us that God is the starting-point of man, that God is the point to be attained by man, and that our Lord Jesus Christ—God made man—is the way, the form, the model, the means, to conduct man to his end. “I am Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end,” He says. Elsewhere, He says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” For, says the Apostle, “there is but one God and one Mediator between God and man—the man Jesus Christ.” The life thus proposed to us clearly involves all supernatural perfection of grace for, in “Christ abode all the fullness of the divinity corporally.” By an eternal law, that which is perfect in the highest order involves all the perfection of the lower. Therefore, in seeking to conform to the image of the Son of God, we come by all that is most perfect in the order of nature. Thus, “godliness is profitable to all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.” Let us see how far the virtue of meekness conduces to the natural and supernatural perfection of man. First, then, what is meekness?

### WHAT IS MEEKNESS?

Meekness is the virtue or power by which the passion of anger is so moderated and restrained as not to rise within us *except when necessary* and in measure that is necessary. Meekness is then, as you perceive, an *exercise of power* in the reason of man over the inferior appetites and powers of the soul.



We know that man is made up of body and soul of matter and spirit—each with its own nature and its own powers—wonderfully united and acting on each other within the one being. The soul has its own affections and desires, its own rational appetite, which is the will—guided and influenced by reason. The soul is joined to a material body and depends upon sense for its impressions; thus, there is also a *sensual appetite* and excess depraved desire and passion assail the soul. These sensitive appetites manifest in two great master-passions in man—concupiscence and anger. Concupiscence prompts us to seek what is, or what we conceive to be, desirable. Anger disturbs and excites the soul when that which is desirable is removed or when we are impeded in pursuit of that desire.

Here then is man—as far as we have to deal with him—made up of **intellect**, **will**, and the passions of **concupiscence** and **anger**. There are also the *theological virtues*, which entirely regard the supernatural perfection of man, and the *cardinal virtues*, which may be said to regard his natural perfection. These virtues affect the four powers or passions, for prudence is in the **intellect**, justice in the **will**, temperance regards the passion of **concupiscence**, and fortitude that of **anger**. The more these virtues govern and influence their respective powers, the more perfect is man, in the order of nature.

Saint Thomas says, “It belongs to human virtue to make a man perfect by reducing his every act to the dominion of reason, which is done in three ways.

- 1st. The reason itself is rightly ordered, and this is done by the intellectual virtues or powers.
- 2nd. Reason thus ordered or perfected becomes the guide and ruler of all human affairs, through the medium of the virtue of justice; and,
- 3rd. All impediments to such guidance or government of reason are removed,
  - (a) by the virtue of temperance, which restrains the will when it is drawn aside in pursuit of that which right reason forbids, and,
  - (b) by fortitude, which overcomes, by strength of mind and will, the difficulties that arise in the way of virtue, just as a man by strength and energy of body conquers and repels all bodily difficulties.”

Thus, we behold how all natural perfection in man consists in the perfect and absolute dominion of a well-ordered reason or mind. Perfection means order, for, observes the Angelic Master, the perfection and beauty of all creation consists in order.

Our idea of order is that inferior things should be subject to things superior and that which is supreme should govern all. Yet, as the intellect or reason is the supreme power in man, it follows that man’s natural perfection must consist in the dominion of this reason over all the inferior powers of the soul and all the passions and inclinations of the man.



Thus it was with the first man as he came from the hands of God—a perfect being. “God made man right,” says the Preacher. Elsewhere, the Preacher says, “He filled him with the knowledge of understanding and He created in him the science of the spirit and filled his heart with wisdom.” In that happy time, before sin found its entrance into the newly created world, all was perfection, because all was order. The inferior animals and beings were perfectly subject to man. “Let us make man,” says the Lord, “to our image and likeness and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, the fowls of the air, the beasts, the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth.” The senses and all the inferior appetites in man himself, were under complete control of the will, which, in its turn, was ruled by a reason that was in perfect subjection to God.

When this order was disturbed by Adam’s sin—when man’s reason and will refused to be obedient to God—the inferior appetites and passions, in their turn, refused to be subject to the reason and the creation of God and the stubborn earth itself rebelled against man. In losing the supernatural gifts of grace and innocence, man also lost the very natural integrity and perfection of his being. The connection between nature and grace was such that—when grace departed, the integrity of nature was also lost and humanity remained not only robbed and stripped of its divine clothing but also mutilated and powerless.

From all this it follows that 1) the passion that most directly and powerfully assails the dominion of reason—blinds it, overpowers it, casts it from its throne—is the greatest impediment to man’s natural perfection. 2) the virtue or power that masters that passion—binds it down under the dominion of the mind, directs its energy, whilst it destroys its inordinate tendency—is the greatest safeguard of reason and, consequently, the most directly conducive to man’s natural perfection. ***That passion is anger and that virtue is meekness.***

We well may conclude that Christ Our Lord, in restoring to us the supernatural and enabling us to acquire the virtue of meekness, has also returned to us the integrity and natural perfection that Adam lost.

## WHAT IS ANGER?

Anger is defined as an inordinate desire for revenge. The sensitive appetite, excited or inflamed by real or imaginary injury, acts upon the will, inclining and inducing it to a desire for revenge. Reason no longer guides and directs the will. Instead, the sensitive appetite (i.e., an inferior power of the soul) directs a superior—consequently, *an inversion of order results*. The very nature of anger is to desire and act without reflection. Hence, nothing is more common than to plead anger as an excuse for irrational acts. We say, a man did such a thing under the great excitement of anger; consequently, he cannot be held accountable and we must excuse him. Yes, excuse him,



but the very plea put forward in his defense shows how completely reason is destroyed, for the time being, by this passion. As the poet says, "*ira furor brevis est*" (it is a temporary madness). We sometimes hear the phrase, "maddened by anger," and law actually describes murder committed in anger, as manslaughter—one animal slaughtering another. We never speak of a man as maddened by pride or maddened by lust. We do speak of a man as maddened by anger. A man in anger is recognized as an unreasoning and unreasonable animal. He no longer answers to the definition of man, "*animal rationale*."

In fact, if right reason were supposed to rule him, we should cease to look upon him as angry, for *it is not the excitement but the inordinate, unreasoning excess of excitement*, amounting to perturbation of mind and subversion of reason, that constitutes the sin of anger.

There is another excitement that has all the appearance of sinful anger, that even leads to terrible results, and, yet, is sinless because it is under the control of a well-ordered mind. Saint Chrysostom says, "He that is angry without cause, sins; but he who has sufficient cause, sins not. *Nam si ira non fuerit nec doctrina proficit nee judicia stant—nec crimina compescuntur.*"

Such was the indignation of Moses, "the meekest of men." He saw an Egyptian strike one of the Hebrews, his brethren . . . he slew the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. Again, "When he came nigh to the camp he saw the calf and the dances, and, being very angry, he threw the tables out of his hand and broke them at the foot of the mount . . . and, standing in the gate of the camp, he said, "If any man be on the Lord's side, let him join with me." And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him and he said to them, "Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel; put every man his sword upon his thigh; go and return from gate to gate through the midst of the camp, and let every man kill his brother and friend and neighbor." And the sons of Levi did according to the words of Moses and there were slain that day about three and twenty thousand men." Yet, what says the Holy Ghost? "Moses was a man exceeding meek above all men that dwelt upon earth."

Such again was the noble indignation of Mathathias. . . . "a priest of the sons of Joarib," for when "there came a certain Jew in the sight of all to sacrifice to the idols upon the altar in the city of Modin, according to the king's commandment. And Mathathias saw, and was grieved, and his veins trembled, and his wrath was kindled *according to the judgment of the law*, and running upon him he slew him upon the altar."

We can go far higher for an illustration of the word of the Psalmist, "Be ye angry and sin not." "And Jesus went up to Jerusalem and He found in the temple them that sold oxen



and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting. And when He had made, as it were, a scourge of little cords, He drove them all out of the temple . . . and the money of the changers He poured out and the tables He overthrew.”

In all these and the like examples, a high and perfect motive of reason governed and directed the acts. In Moses, it was the inspiration of God. In Mathathias, it was the “*judgment of the law*.” In Our Blessed Lord, it was a devouring zeal for the glory and honor of His Father’s house.

There is then, as you perceive, a good and a bad anger; one anger justifiable and another unjustifiable. Hence Aristotle says, “He is worthy of praise or of blame, who is sometimes angry.”

When is anger sinful and when is it not?

First, anger is sinful when we desire vindication or revenge for its own sake and not for the lawful end of correction of our neighbor; or when we wish to see the innocent punished or to have excessive punishment inflicted on the guilty; or when we wish to subvert the legitimate order and course of justice. Simply, anger is sinful when the desire is contrary to right reason.

Secondly, anger is sinful when the motion or excitement is allowed to become too vehement, so as to be either internal or external rage, for thus it takes the place of reason. Saint Gregory the Great says, “All care must be taken lest anger, which should be the handmaid of virtue, be allowed to predominate in the mind lest she should become mistress, who, like an obedient servant, should stand behind reason.”

As we have seen, no passion more completely destroys reason than inordinate and sinful anger. Even more, anger deforms even the exterior man, making him like to a demon. Hence, Saint John Chrysostom says, “Nothing is more frightful than the face of an infuriated man.” Saint Gregory, quoting indeed from Seneca, says, “The excited heart throbs—the body trembles—the senseless tongue pours forth incoherent words—the inflamed countenance fires with rage—the furious eyes sparkle again!” The mild philosopher concludes, “What must the angry soul be whose external image is so foul and deformed!”

## GLORIES OF MEEKNESS

If that is anger, how high and glorious must that virtue be that conquers, moderates, and restrains anger—that either represses it altogether to preserve perfect peace of soul and body or permits it to rise only as far as reason permits or demands and thus makes a virtue of what may be so hideous a vice? Such is meekness.



Many persons, particularly the young, look upon meekness as something unnecessary and superfluous—a virtue of the cloister, women, children, or the elderly. Thus blinded and misled, they allow an evil, impetuous temper and passion to enslave them. Yet, surely, no virtue is more manly or ennobling than that which enables a man to govern himself and his own passions. How can a man rule others who is unable to rule himself? How can a man associate with others who is powerless and unable to live with his own soul in peace?

He truly is fitted to be an *Anax Andron*—a king of men—who has learned by meekness to keep the little kingdom of his own soul and body in the proper order of subjection to reason.

Every virtue is a power—the very word virtue means power—and what is more terrible in its power than meekness? We admire the strength of Samson, quietly turning aside into the vineyard and tearing the lion as he would have torn a lamb into pieces. Far more wonderful is the strength of the man who can seize the demon of anger and chain him down as the archangel chained Lucifer. Saint Thomas asks the question whether meekness be the greatest of moral virtues? After some distinctions, he answers, “In one sense, meekness has a peculiar excellence amongst the virtues; for as anger, on account of its impetuosity and suddenness, deprives the soul (more than any other passion) of freedom and of the power of judgment, so meekness, which governs anger, preserves unto man (beyond all other virtues) the possession of himself.” Hence, Ecclesiasticus saith, “My son, keep thy soul in meekness and give it honor according to its deserts. Who will justify him that sinneth against his own soul? Who will honor him that dishonoreth his own soul?”

How powerless is the angry man when he is confronted by one who holds his soul and his temper in meekness! How futile was the rage of the Pharisees and priests in the presence of the meekness of Jesus Christ! We have seen how far this virtue contributes to our natural perfection. Let us now consider its supernatural excellence. The perfection of man in the supernatural order of grace is to be made like to the Lord Jesus Christ, by grace here—by glory hereafter.

“Those whom He foreknew and predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son, the same also He called, and whom He called the same also He justified, and whom He justified the same also He glorified.” The resemblance of grace here reveals itself in virtues. Foremost of these is meekness, because our Divine Lord Himself puts it first, saying, “Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart.”

\*\*\*\*\*





**This e-book was produced by:**

**The Seraphim Company, Inc.**

**8528 Kenosha Drive  
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

**[www.servi.org](http://www.servi.org)**